

**VIRTUAL WORLDS**  
**THE NEW PLAYGROUND FOR SEXUAL PREDATORS**

**by**

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

## VIRTUAL WORLDS THE NEW PLAYGROUND FOR SEXUAL PREDATORS

Every day millions of users enter virtual worlds to socialize, learn, explore, and even work. There are many positive activities happening in virtual worlds. Contrary to popular belief, virtual worlds like *Second Life* are not simply online role-playing games. Dozens of universities are conducting classes, businesses are holding conferences, and users are going into cyberspace to visit cities and countries they cannot afford to see in the “real” world.

For those that dismiss virtual worlds as a fad, they need to look at the growing number of participants. With *Second Life* having more than 16 million subscribers, *World of Warcraft* more than 12 million, and *Club Penguin* with over 30 million participants, the population of these three virtual worlds alone exceeds the real world population of Canada, Australia, and Ireland combined.<sup>i</sup> Virtual worlds are also continuing to increase in popularity. Virtual worlds consultancy kZero estimates the number of registered accounts in the virtual worlds sector totaled 579 million globally in the second quarter of 2009. This figure represents an increase of 38.6% from the previous quarter, when global registered accounts totaled 417 million.<sup>ii</sup>

Unfortunately, wherever there is good there is also bad. It should be no surprise to learn that some users have found ways to exploit virtual-world technology. The criminal element has found ways to commit real-world crimes in virtual worlds, including theft, money laundering, and fraud. In addition, there have been crimes as serious as homicide directly linked to activity on virtual worlds. Despite this, the concept of virtual worlds is relatively new to law enforcement. Most police officers have never logged into a virtual world, or even know what a virtual world is. Unfortunately, in addition to those who use the virtual world for fun, to create social networks, and to further their understanding of the world (real and virtual) around them,

there also lurks danger. One of the most dangerous realities of the virtual world are the predators who have staked out territory of their own.

Hunting sexual predators is like the war on drugs. They are always seemingly looking for new ways to lure our children. They act. We act. The sheer scope of the Internet can make it easier for them to go undetected or cover their tracks. Our goal is to figure out how to keep up. Meanwhile, sexual offenders roam virtually undetected, preying on their next real world victim. Law enforcement agencies must begin to realize that more and more activity is taking place in virtual worlds, and be prepared to investigate crimes and identify or monitor sexual predators by observing their activity in that environment.

## LIVING OUTSIDE MEATSPACE

To most law enforcement officers the concept of living a second life within a virtual world is incomprehensible. It is difficult for many to understand how one could consume, or for some to essentially replace, their real world life with a virtual life. A segment of the population within virtual worlds view the “real world” (aka meatspace) as just a place to eat and sleep. For example, twenty percent of gamers in *World of Warcraft* say the virtual world is their primary place of residence.<sup>iii</sup>

Due to virtual worlds still being a relatively new concept, little research has been conducted by psychologists and law enforcement related to use patterns or other indications of a social pathology. For this reason, it is difficult to provide specific data on the number of sexual predators living in virtual worlds, or how many predators have used virtual worlds to develop and hone their craft. Psychologists are still working to understand the mindset of those who have, in effect, traded in their real world lives for a virtual world life. Despite the lack of statistical data, real life examples exist.

## THE DANGERS THAT EXIST

It is clear that pedophiles are present in virtual worlds. In one instance, a British reporter created an avatar and discovered the dark side of *Second Life* in a playground called “Wonderland”. Open to any user inside *Second Life*, Wonderland was actually created by persons who allowed virtual sex between their avatars and those representing children and minors.<sup>iv</sup> As an indication of how many sexual predators roam the web, consider that in 2009, *MySpace* identified and removed about 90,000 sex offenders from its social networking site under pressure from various Attorneys General, who also advocated the implementation of safeguards in social network sites.<sup>v</sup> With the numbers of sex offenders on the net and indications that they are also populating virtual worlds, considerations in how to keep the internet a safe place for children needs to include virtual worlds.

The challenge in virtual worlds is that laws that exist in the “real world” do not necessarily apply to virtual worlds. Virtual child pornography is viewed as imaginary. Based on that theory, these virtual “crimes” are not illegal. In the 2006 case of *Ashcroft v. The Free Speech Coalition*, The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a ban on virtual child pornography could not be upheld because it was overly broad and unconstitutional under the First Amendment. The courts have determined that virtual worlds serve more as a means of expression, or a form of “speech,” rather than actual conduct. They have concluded the laws are not necessary where technology, such as filtering, can resolve the problem.

Filters alone, though, are not sufficient to fully protect children. Current filters do not prevent work-arounds or other inventive use of characters to circumvent them. Most virtual worlds designed for children have filters that prevent swearing. It didn’t take long, however, for children to figure out the filter. The children started greeting each other with comments like, “i

am sofa king glad to see you.” Neither the word “sofa” nor “king” were on the banned words list. But say them fast, and you see how they have created their own code to defeat the filters. *Club Penguin* adds 500-1000 words to the banned chat-words per day in an attempt to keep up with the slang that works its way into their site; all to little avail.<sup>vi</sup>

If children can figure out the filters, do you not think adults will as well? Predators are using virtual worlds to communicate because they can. We cannot rely solely on technology and filters to resolve or prevent sexual predator behavior. True, the filters are necessary, but insufficient. To protect children in the realm of the Internet, it will require unprecedented collaboration and cooperation amongst the Internet industry, law enforcement, and parents.

## STINGS AND SEDUCTION IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

Internet technology continues to expand becoming more interactive, more realistic, and more social. As a result, opportunities for sexual predators to victimize children within virtual worlds are almost limitless and predominately unregulated. Similar to undercover stings being conducted in social networking sites, Law enforcement needs to expand their enforcement to virtual worlds in an effort to make sexual predators think twice before attempting to lure a child exploring on a “virtual world” into the sexual predators “real world.” News stories of child predators meeting up with children that they met on social network sites or virtual worlds is becoming too common. In April 2011, an Idaho man flew a 12-year-old girl he met online playing *World of Warcraft* to Idaho for sex.<sup>vii</sup> In May 2011, a 20-year-old took a Greyhound bus from Denver to have sex with a 15-year-old Albuquerque girl he met on *Facebook*.<sup>viii</sup> In July 2011, police in Pennsylvania arrested a 23-year-old man for engaging in a sexual relationship with a 14-year-old girl after the two met in the online game *World of Warcraft*.<sup>ix</sup>

The Federal Trade Commission reported that during a study of activity in virtual worlds, they focused on 27 online worlds including the infamous *Second Life*, *Gaia Online*, *Kaneva*, *Bots*, *Zwinktopia*, and more. The FTC found 19 of the 27 virtual worlds provided at least one instance of sexually explicit or violent content. Five sites were found to be heavily laden with explicit content, four provided a modest amount, and ten had a low amount of explicit content.<sup>x</sup> As in many other matters, the ultimate responsibility for the safety of our kids rests in the hands of two groups: their parents, and the policing agencies charged with their safety.

### **LAW ENFORCEMENT AND PARENTS: A COMBINED EFFORT**

Laws, filters designed by the Internet providers, and law enforcement task forces can do a lot to protect your children, but parents can be the key to preventing their children from being victimized. Most children do not understand the online risks and most parents lack the knowledge in Internet technology to effectively guard against them. The Internet has opened the door for predators to sexually exploit children while seemingly safe within their own home, and many parents do not even realize it. Parents would think twice before allowing their child to go to a playground alone; however, they appear to have little concern allowing their child to be on the Internet with no parental supervision.

Parents take precautions to prevent their child from getting snatched off the street by teaching them to not talk to strangers; they also supervise them when playing at their local playgrounds. It is time to realize that the “strangers” are lurking in a different type of playground, one that has moved to the internet. Sexual predators are going to go where the children are, and there are more children playing on the Internet these days than playing outdoors. Parents often set curfews and have rules about talking to strangers in the “real world.” Many of the same rules should still apply – don’t talk with strangers, don’t “go with them”

anywhere, and tell your parents if an adult tries to talk with them or make strange requests. The admonitions are still valid, it is just the venue that has changed.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS:**

A Federal Trade Commission (FTC) consumer alert indicated that the anonymity that avatars provide can encourage people to “act out” behaviors that may be considered inappropriate. The FTC provides tips on a consumer alert (<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/alerts/alt038.shtm>) on how a parent can help their child avoid content- or virtual spaces- that may be inappropriate for them.

- Start by talking to them about where they’re going online — and how they’re getting there, if not through the family computer. Help them understand that personal information about themselves, family members, and friends should stay private; you also can talk to them about avoiding sex talk or sexual situations online.
- If your child visits a virtual world, you may want to check it out, too. Get to know what’s on the site, the privacy protections it offers, and how it verifies the ages of site visitors.
- If your child gets really interested in online gaming or virtual worlds, watch for changes in their patterns of behavior that could indicate an unhealthy obsession. Nobody knows your child better than you do, so you’re best placed to know what sites may be appropriate for your child.

Additional resources for parents can be found at the following locations:

- Netsmartz Workshop for Parents & Guardians-  
<http://www.netsmartz.org/netparents.htm>
- Netsmartz Workshop 411- <http://www.netsmartz411.org>

- FBI Parents Guide to Internet Safety-

<http://www.fbi.gov/publications/pguide/pguide.htm>

- Online Safety Guidelines- <http://kids.getnetwise.org/safetyguide/>

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT:**

In much the same way, there are steps for law enforcement to consider. Technology continues to advance, and if law enforcement doesn't keep up, virtual worlds will continue to be populated by pedophiles with an increased feeling of security. Pedophiles will feel safe to hide behind the virtual walls and act out their fantasies and become more desensitized to their behavior, develop contacts with like minded people, exchange virtual pornography, and hunt down "real life" victims. Law Enforcement will have to break down the walls exposing those within virtual worlds who intent harm. During a gathering of a group of experts, including a United States Attorney, and members of the Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) and FBI's Sexual Assault Felony Enforcement (SAFE) task forces, the following suggestions were recommended for law enforcement:

- When conducting forensic analysis of computers from those engaged in child exploitation, investigators should look for virtual world software installed on the machine. If it is found, the investigator should look into the suspect's activity to determine whether they were engaged in inappropriate online contact, trading child pornography or soliciting children.
- Law enforcement must be educated to ensure that the goal of Internet safety includes virtual worlds, and then take steps to enhance their proficiency in the investigation of incidents reported there.

- Law Enforcement needs to infiltrate these rings in virtual environments, such as *Second Life*, just as they infiltrate these rings in social networking environments and in chat rooms.

## CONCLUSION

Children today visit virtual worlds online more than ever. In fact, they have become entertainment for children of all ages. As a result, virtual worlds have become hunting grounds for those who seek to exploit children sexually. Given the fact that child pornography can be traded in virtual worlds and that age play is conducted there, law enforcement will see virtual worlds used as an avenue for child exploitation. Any location where children congregate raises the specter of sexual predators and virtual worlds is not excluded. Law Enforcement must take an active role in reducing the opportunities and the ease that sexual predators seem to currently possess in gaining access to vulnerable children. The Internet is a vast space and law enforcement alone cannot prevent every sexual defiant from contacting a child. Parents need to take just as many precautions when their child is on the computer as they would when their child walks out the front door. Working together, we can continue to make the Internet a safer place for our children to learn and play.

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<sup>i</sup> Goodman, M. (2009, March). Virtual world crime. *Council of Europe Octopus Interface Conference*.

<sup>ii</sup> Virtual Worlds Popularity Spikes. (2009, July). *Virtual Worlds News*. Retrieved from <http://www.virtualworldsnews.com/2009/07/virtual-world-popularity-spikes%20.html> .

<sup>iii</sup> Gilson, D. (2007, May). Even better than the real thing. *Mother Jones*. Retrieved from <http://motherjones.com/politics/2007/05/even-better-real-thing> .

<sup>iv</sup> Pedophile Playground Discovered in 'Second Life' Virtual World. (2007, November). *Fox News*. Retrieved from <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,306937,00.html> .

<sup>v</sup> MySpace: 90,000 Sex Offenders Removed From Site. (2009, February). *USA Today*. Retrieved from [http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2009-02-03-myspace-offenders\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2009-02-03-myspace-offenders_N.htm) .

<sup>vi</sup> Androvich, M. (2008, September). *MMO Week: Industry has been irresponsible with kids*. GamesIndustry.biz. Retrieved from <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/mmo-week-industry-has-been-irresponsible-with-kids> .

<sup>vii</sup> Cartier, C. (2011, April). *Alex Trowell, Idaho World of Warcraft Player Arrested for Fondling 12-Year-old Girl He Met Playing Game*. Seattle Weekly. Retrieved from [http://blogs.seattleweekly.com/dailyweekly/2011/04/alex\\_trowell\\_idaho\\_world\\_of\\_wa.php](http://blogs.seattleweekly.com/dailyweekly/2011/04/alex_trowell_idaho_world_of_wa.php) .

<sup>viii</sup> Tomlin, A. (2011, May). *Child Sex Predators Come to NM For Sex*. KASA. Retrieved from [http://www.kasa.com/dpps/news/crime/child-sex-predators-come-to-nm-for-sex\\_3821848](http://www.kasa.com/dpps/news/crime/child-sex-predators-come-to-nm-for-sex_3821848) .

<sup>ix</sup> MMORPG's New Hunting Ground For Sexual Predators? (2011, July). *GameXploits.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.gameexploits.com/news/mmorpg/mmorpgs-new-hunting-ground-for-sexual-predators-72.html> .

<sup>x</sup> Federal Trade Commission (2009, December). *FTC Virtual Worlds and Kids: Mapping The Risks*. Retrieved from <http://www.ftc.gov/os/2009/12/oecd-vwrpt.pdf> .